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ABSTRACT

The two parts of this report on primary education in Switzerland (comprising the first through 9th school years) provide an overview of the organization of schooling and a description of educational trends and reforms. Part I describes official objectives of primary education; units responsible at national, regional, local, and school levels; transition from preschool to elementary and elementary to lower-secondary education; statistics on pupils and teachers; divisions and composition of classes; length of the school day, week, and year; main branches in the curriculum; pupil assessment; training of teachers; para-educational services; and institutionalized contacts between schools, families, and municipalities. Part II describes reforms in specific subjects, assessment, transition, and curriculum; and the Situation in Primary Schools (SIPRI) review. Concluding material recapitulates the 22 theses developed in the final report of the SIPRI project. Brief profiles of two other Swiss educational projects are included. (RH)

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"Innovation in primary education"

Primary education in Switzerland

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COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL CO-OPERATION

Project No. 8 on

"Innovation in primary education"

PRIMARY EDUCATION IN SWITZERLAND

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Update of statistical data
and of Part II
(Trends and reforms)

by

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March 1988

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PART I

1. Official objectives of primary education

The objectives of primary education in the 26 cantons of Switzerland are set out in each canton's Education Act, often in a brief paragraph, where they are generally formulated in a fairly abstract way. However, they are formulated in a more explicit manner in many curricula - either by way of an introduction or as guiding principles.

The objectives and curricula of primary education can be summarised as follows:

- During the first school year pupils must progress from play to a set activitiy and submit to a certain discipline. This first year is designed to develop oral expression and vocabulary, as well as provide an initiation in reading and mathematics.

- During the 2nd and 3rd years the mother tonue has pride of place (in German-speaking Switzerland the aim is to progress from the spoken dialect to the written language), alongside mathematics, knowledge of the environment, creative activities, writing, music and physical education.

- The intermediate level (4th, 4th/5th, or 4th/6th school years, depending on the canton), plays a special role for the purposes of pupil selection for secondary cycle I of compulsory schooling: history and geography are added to the subjects taught hitherto.

- The 7th, 8th and 9th classes of primary schools (upper primary level, terminal classes, practical sections of orientation cycles) are designed to supplement knowledge of those pupils who will not be continuing their schooling and to prepare them for practical life. The following subjects are therefore added: civic and general education, book-keeping etc.

2. Bodies responsible for primary education at national, regional, local and school level

The federal government's powers are very limited in the field of primary education. They are designed solely to ensure the implementation of Article 27 of the Federal Constitution, which requires the cantons to provide primary education of adequate standard under the exclusive control of the civil authorities. Such education is compulsory and free of charge in publicly-owned schools.

The authorities really in charge of public education are the cantons, which are responsible for finance, organisation, management and supervision. They delegate some of their duties to the municipalities ("communes").

Each canton has its own Education Act, defining the various powers as well as the school system as a whole at all levels. Most cantons have an education directorate (with variable powers), usually headed by the Director of Public Education.

At municipal level, schools are often run by school authorities elected by the people.

3. The transition from the pre-school period to primary education and from primary to lower-secondary education

The transition from the pre-school period to primary education takes place at the age of 6 or 7. There are considerable differences between the aims and functions of preparatory schools and those of nursery schools and between German-speaking Switzerland on the one hand and French and Italian-speaking Switzerland on the other. In German-speaking Switzerland the two institutions are quite separate and each one's teachers undergo very different training. In French-speaking Switzerland there is closer liaison between pre-school education and the initial classes of primary schools. In the canton of Geneva, for example, the first and second classes of infant schools and the first and second levels of primary schools form part of the same cycle and are jointly administered.

In addition to the upper cycle, which is divided into sections, most cantons have an undivided upper primary cycle which takes children up to the end of their compulsory schooling. The transition from primary school to secondary level I takes place after the 6th year of primary school (in 18 cantons), after the 5th year (in 4 cantons) or after the 4th year (in 4 other cantons). In most cantons, entering secondary level I means moving from a homogeneous class with a single teacher to a structure divided into several sections with varying requirements. Although in some cantons, secondary level I is fairly selective and allows only limited freedom of movement, either vertical or horizontal, other cantons have an orientation cycle of a more open kind.

4. Statistics on pupils and teachers

Number of pupils for the 1986/87 school year:

		Total	Girls
1P	All cantons	69,916	34,574
2P	All cantons	70,332	34,381
3P	All cantons	69,971	34,215
4P	All cantons	70,043	34,654
5P	(Excepting the cantons of Berne, Basle-Urban, Vaud and Jura)	52,286	25,550
6P	(Excepting the cantons of Berne, Basle-Urban, Vaud Jura, Aargau, Basle-Rural, Neuchatel and Ticino)	40,697	20,004
	Total	373,245	183,378

Average number of pupils per class (1986/87): 18.8.

(The cantonal averages range between 15.7 and 21.0 pupils per class)

Number of classes during the 1986/87 school year: 21,144, of which:

- 16,366 single-level and
- 4,778 multiple-level classes.

Statistics on teachers employed in compulsory schooling were published in 1987 and can be resumed as follows:

a. Breakdown of primary school teaching staff into age groups

Age Group	Number (school year 1986/87)	%
20-29 years	7,430	31.1
30-39 years	8,616	36.1
40-49 years	4,710	19.7
50-59 years	2,589	10.8
60 years and over	545	2.3
Total	23,890	100.0

b. Breakdown of primary school teachers by age and sex

Age group	Male teachers	%	Female teachers	%
20-29 years	2,445	32.9	4,985	67.1
30-39 years	4,001	46.4	4,615	53.6
40-49 years	2,215	47.0	2,495	53.0
50-59 years	1,312	50.7	1,277	49.3
60 years and over	339	62,2	206	37.8
Total and average %	10,312	43,2	13,578	56.8

Although the average proportion of women for Switzerland as a whole is 56.8%, the figure varies considerably from one age group to another; it also differs widely from one canton to another, from 34% (Grisons) to 92.6% (Vaud).

5. Sections, divisions and composition of classes

Normally children of the same age are grouped together in single-level classes. Multiple-level classes, ie classes grouping together pupils belonging to 2, 3, 4 or more levels, are chiefly found in sparsely populated regions, where there are a very small number of pupils in each class.

6. Length of the school day, week and year in primary education

On the basis of the average annual number of hours during the first year of primary school, ie 750, the daily total is 3 3/4 hours. This number increases steadily, reaching about 5 1/4 hours in the 6th year of primary school.

Schools operate in both the morning and the afternoon. Depending on the canton, pupils are free either all day on Saturdays or on Saturday afternoons plus another half-day or on Saturday afternoons plus another whole day.

The school year comprises 34 1/2 - 40 1/2 weeks. Long holidary (5-9 weeks) are granted in summer in all cantons.

7. Main branches in the primary school curriculum

The mother tongue and mathematics are the main subjects in the primary school curriculum. Then come the following branches: creative and musical education, natural sciences and knowledge of the environment. Lastly come religious education, physical education, handicrafts and domestic science.

8. Pupil assessment

In most cantons pupils are still assessed by means of marks. Two or three times a year they are given a report showing their results in the various subjects. The average marks obtained at the end of the school year - either in all subjects or in some major ones - constitute the criterion for promotion, either permanent or temporary, from one school level to another. Experiments in teaching without marks in the early years of primary education are under way in several cantons.

9. Basic and further training of primary school teachers

In roughly half the cantons, future primary school teachers are trained at teacher-training colleges after completing their secondary education.

In a few cantons, (Geneva, Basle-Urban, Zurich, Neuchâtel, Vaud, Aargau) pedagogical and didactic training is available after the award of the secondary school-leaving certificate ("maturité"); the same arrangement is planned in Ticino and Valais. Other cantons offer both possibilities of training.

Courses at teacher-training colleges last 5 years (4 in some cantons), beginning upon the completion of compulsory schooling (from age 15/16 to age 19/21).

In addition to an examination in specific subjects, candidates must demonstrate their moral, intellectual and physical aptitudes and their abilities in singing music, art and gymnastics.

In teacher-training colleges providing a single 4-year cycle of studies, general knowledge and specific vocational knowledge are taught in parallel. Those whose courses last 5 years usually comprise 2 cycles: a lower cycle covering general knowledge and an upper cycle providing more specifically pedagogical, psychological and didactic training.

Courses include practical work and teaching practice.

The cantons regularly organise compulsory or optional further training courses in close co-operation with teachers themselves. Compulsory courses take place partly during teaching hours and partly on days off; optional courses take place almost exclusively in teachers' free time.

10. Para-educational services

The following services are provided in primary schools: regular medical examinations of pupils and teachers; dental care; tests of academic maturity; early detection of academic problems, assessment of and support for children at risk whose behaviour or development shows anomalies; educational counselling (a psycho-pedagogical team); transport of pupils; special tuition for migrants' children in the language of the host country as well as in the language and culture of origin.

11. Institutionalised contacts between primary schools, families and municipalities

Co-operation between teachers, schools and families depends to a great extent on the teacher's own initiative (meetings with parents, visiting days or open days, individual interviews with parents). There are few parents' associations. However, parents have an opportunity of influencing the running of school affairs thanks to the democratic voting process (election of teachers and school authorities, participation during the construction of school buildings etc).

PART II - TRENDS AND REFORMS

Reforms in specific subjects

- Teaching of the second national language at an early age: lengthy trials have been conducted in the teaching of French in the 4th or 5th year of primary schools in German-speaking Switzerland; in French-speaking Switzerland, German is taught to a limited extent even in the 3rd year.

In 1975, in the light of the reports of a committee of experts as well as the results of a broad consultation, the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Directors of Public Education (CDIP) recommended that the cantons "introduce, renew and co-ordinate the teaching of the second language for all pupils undergoing compulsory education" and make provision for the necessary back-up.

- Introduction of new mathematics, either experimentally or permanently, and provision of appropriate training for primary school teachers: in September 1973, after lengthy experimentation, new mathematics was introduced in French-speaking Siwtzerland in all first-year classes. There is now a full syllabus covering the first six years.

In the CDIP a "mathematical forum" has been set up for the purpose of organising a continuous exchange of information.

This year, after consulting all interested bodies, the CDIP recommended that cantons align their new programmes on a series of "points of convergence" and "guidelines" as regards the teaching of mathematics during compulsory schooling.

- The mother tongue has also been the subject of reforms in several German-speaking cantons as well as in French-speaking Switzerland, where "renovated teaching of French" has been introduced. This new way of teaching the mother tongue is aimed at developing ability to communicate and encouraging personal discovery of the language.

Reforms of assessment and transition arrangements

- Many experiments of teaching without marks are being carried out in the early years of primary education; as a result, new tools of assessment are being devised. By means of transitional classes (where one year's teaching is spread over two years) or the provision of educational support (the "fluidity" experiment in Geneva), attempts are being made to ensure a smooth transition from the pre-school period to lower primary school.

Moreover, wide-ranging experiments are under way with a view to replacing the traditional entrance examination at secondary I level by different transitional arrangements.

Curriculum reforms

- It is envisaged prefacing the new or renovated curricula with some "idées-force" with the aim of laying down guiding principles for the structure and development of schools.

- Similarly, attempts are being made to adapt curricula in order to guarantee equality of opportunity to girls and boys in respect of training (following an amendment to the Federal Constitution).

The SIPRI project

When the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Directors of Public Education (CDIP) recommended in 1975 that cantons introduce teaching of the second national language earlier, in primary schools, the Conference of Swiss Associations of Teachers (CASE/KOSLO) asked for an overall review to be made of the Situation in Primary schools (= SIPRI). In 1978, the Plenary Assembly of the CDIP agreed to go ahead with the SIPRI project, appointed two Directors and a Chairman to supervise it and endorsed a rough draft breaking the project down into four study themes:

- objectives of primary education: aims and realities;

- functions and forms of assessment;

- transition from the pre-primary period to primary school;

- contacts and co-operation between schools and families.

The purpose of the SIPRI project was to identify the main aspects of the present situation in primary schools in Switzerland and to propose and test practical improvements to the system, in close liaison with school staff and educational researchers and authorities. This would require an in-depth debate at the inter-cantonal level on the problems of primary schools.

Selected "contact schools" were used for observation and experimentation in conditions approaching real life in schools. Four working groups made up of researchers, representatives of school authorities, teachers' associations, parents and teachers in the contact schools carried out the research work, calling upon scientific experts when necessary.

The results obtained were made public as the work progressed and widely disseminated in the educational environment during special study meetings, seminars or intensive courses. The publications issued to date seem to indicate that SIPRI has largely achieved its prime objective of describing the situation in schools in the four selected areas. Furthermore, the numerous working documents and the research and survey reports contain many concrete proposals for improving primary schools.

The final report (1) summarises the results obtained. All the arguments it puts forward are based on the various SIPRI publications. The aim of the report is not to provide an exhaustive description of primary schooling or to list major current development trends, but to deal exclusively with the features covered by the SIPRI project.

We have deliberately avoided describing the current situation of primary schools in Switzerland in this final report because the situation varies considerably from one canton to another and from one region to another (2). We decided to present the results of our research and deliberations in the form of theses, fully aware that some of them have been achieved long since or are nearing completion in several cantons, while in others they are still at the project stage. Some cantons will therefore be reassured by our findings or our recommendations with regard to the innovations they have carried out in their schools, others will be all the more motivated to pursue their efforts in the chosen direction, while others will find ideas in the report which may prove useful to them in the future.

The report comprises six chapters, each with an introduction. The main core of each chapter is made up of a statement of the thesis, by way of a title, followed by an explanatory text. Each thesis is accompanied by corollaries for the attention of specific groups or institutions, such as teachers, headmasters, local school authorities, etc; they propose a range of measures for putting the objectives set out in the theses into action. At the end of each chapter there is a bibliography referring the reader to more detailed documentation on the content of each thesis and the reasoning behind it.

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(1) ECOLE PRIMAIRE SUISSE - Une école pour apprendre.
22 Thèses pour le développement de l'école primaire -
PROJET SIPRI - CDIP - BERNE 1986.
Compiled by Jean-Pierre Salamin (Primary Schools -
Schools for Learning - 22 Theses for the development
of primary schools).

(2) The best example of this is the different procedures for passing from primary school to the first year in secondary school.

The 22 theses developed in the six chapters of the report are as follows:

1. Schools on the move

1.1 Schools and life

The role of schools is to help all children develop the aptitudes, attitudes and knowledge they need in order to understand the world they live in, and solve the problems they come across autonomously. Schools and teaching must therefore forge a dynamic link between the pupil's current environment and the world he/she will eventually live in.

1.2 Education and values

Schools teach the basic rules of conduct for compliance with the fundamental values and standards of society. These values and standards affect what is taught and how it is taught, as well as relations between the people concerned by the educational process.

1.3 Schools - places for development and continuous education

Schools are constantly undergoing changes at the communal, cantonal and inter-cantonal levels. A single teacher cannot cope alone with all this change, so it is up to the local school community to deal with it. The teaching staff of a school is the educational unit which implements projects on continuity and development in schools.

1.4 Schools and flexible policies in the cantons

The extent and efficiency of innovation in the cantonal school system depends on the extent and efficiency of innovation in the different local school communities, which each have their own specific requirements. The canton provides the basic legal framework, leaving enough leeway so that the different communes and schools are able to develop in their own way.

2. Schools and parents

2.1 Contact with the family: collaboration and duties

Contact with the parents of pupils is one of the obligations of every teacher: the ethic of his profession makes it a permanent duty. It is left to the appreciation of the teacher primarily, and also of the school community (and of the parents) to decide how this contact should be approached.

2.2 Discussing teaching objectives and pupil guidance

Dialogue has to take place between those most directly involved in educating children if they are to agree on basic matters of educational concern such as the essential aims of education, or how the children develop and progress throughout their schooling.

2.3 Collaboration project involving teachers, parents and school authorities

The collaboration takes place at each level within the school community (class, school, commune, circumscription) and is materialised through teachers, parents and school authorities at the communal, cantonal and inter-cantonal levels. School authorities at every level support the collaboration projects and create suitable conditions for their implementation.

3. Universal nature of the educational process

3.1 Co-operation within the school

Teachers view their pedagogic role with regard to their pupils as an integral part of the children's schooling and of the educational effects of school in general. In each school community teachers at various levels work in close collaboration to guarantee the continuity of the educational process and a pedagogic climate based on common standards and values.

3.2 Reducing hierarchical differences between schools

Every stage in the teaching and training of growing young people is equally important. The general educational role of schools requires this principle of equality to apply also to the initial and further training of teachers, to their collaboration at the communal or cantonal level and to the conditions in which they work.

3.3 Infant school attendance: two years

The infant school is a stepping stone from early childhood, during which the family educates the child, to the primary school. It generally prepares children for their compulsory schooling, including children with various learning problems and handicaps. It is imporant that every child should be able to attend an infant school free of charge for two years.

3.4 Smooth transition between infant school and primary school

Close collaboration between infant school mistresses and primary school teachers makes for better understanding and mutual adaptation and eases the transition of pupils from one level to the other. If teaching in both infant and primary schools is personalised, based on active global methods which provide for the child's welfare, the child will get a feeling of continuity between the two levels: this will help him/her adapt to the new content of teaching in the primary school.

4. Educational content

4.1 Correcting unintentional hierarchies in teaching content and objectives

It is part of the role of schools to distinguish between the contents and objectives of their teaching in terms of importance. The criteria which determine their scales of importance are based on the need to develop the knowledge and behaviour of the pupil and on their fundamental educational objectives. They must not be based unthinkingly on traditions, on how easy it is to test pupils in a subject or on the demands of post-primary school structures.

4.2 Functional integration of knowledge

Teaching and school syllabuses continue to be organised into separate subjects. It is important at the primary school level, however, to make frequent use of methods spanning several subjects at once. This teaches the pupils a broader approach to things, facilitating the integration of knowledge.

4.3 Basic education

From the variety of paths open to it, the primary school chooses those elements which are necessary and vital to basic education and lead to:

- development of the aptitudes and attitudes defined in school legislation;
- the learning of basic knowledge;
- the ability to transfer knowledge to new situations;
- a broadening of basic cultural references;
- consideration of the major needs and interests of the pupil.

5. Assessing pupils' work

5.1 Distinguishing between different kinds of assessment

Assessing the work of pupils is useful when methods and functions are clearly defined. It is particularly important to distinguish informative assessment from other kinds such as summative or previsional assessment.

5.2 Assessment as an aid to learning

The ideal conditions for learning exist when the pupil is fully aware of the objectives pursued and is regularly informed of the progress he has made. From this point of view informative assessment is the most satisfactory kind of assessment.

5.3 Assessment as an aid to planning

Assessment enables teachers to pinpoint their pupils' particular learning difficulties and to adjust their methods to the possiblities of their pupils.

5.4 Self assessment by the pupil

A pupil's efficiency and sense of fulfilment and responsibility at school depend upon him/her having a realistic idea of his/her own possibilities. One way of achieving this is to make the pupil responsible for his/her own learning process through a self-assessment scheme geared to his/her development.

5.5 Assessment and parent information

Teaching is a task shared by schools and families. Frequent information on the progress and difficulties a pupil is experiencing enable the parents to help the child with his studies and to make more informed career choices.

6. Quality of teaching/workload

6.1 Organisation of teaching, a driving force

Teaching must be organised in such a way as to avoid any hindrance to learning, either from stress and overloading or because the pupil is not given enough to do and lacks stimulation. Building up a climate propitious to learning requires:

- unconditional respect and support from the pupil;
- creating a space in which individual interests and working habits can be developed;
- active learning methods;
- informative assessment methods which encourage learning and include self-assessment schemes.

6.2 Differential teaching

Differential and personalised teaching methods often require the teacher to deviate from traditional methods involving group teaching and group progress. Differential teaching means adjusting the content, objectives, methods and pace of lessons to suit the needs of each pupil or group of pupils. The responsibility for planning, managing and supervising their work is then shared by the pupils.

6.3 Teacher capacity and workload

It is becoming increasingly important for the number of teachers, their working capacity and their enthusiasm for the job to be kept at a high level. The level can be sustained and developed through high-level training and education of teachers, by constantly bolstering their self-confidence, by giving them a certain amount of freedom to make their own decisions, by pedagogic efforts based on objectives and values (guidelines) and by the social support they receive from colleagues and school authorities. Furthermore teachers must be in a position to take a constant look at their teaching activities and their workload, which means being able to take an occasional break from their daily routine (sabbatical year, training courses and so on).

The SIPRI project covered primary schools. The results of this extensive report, however, are equally applicable to other levels of education. Schools should be interested, for example, by our conclusions regarding transition from infant school to primary school, and also by our comments regarding collaboration between school and family for the assessment of pupils' work. We sincerely hope that the SIPRI report will be appreciated and will give rise to pedagogic debate far beyond the primary school.

The considerable means invested in the SIPRI project by the CDIP (Swiss Conference of Cantonal Directors of Public Education) and the Swiss cantons will only have served a useful purpose if school authorities in the cantons and regions, and particularly teacher training and further training institutions and teachers' organisations adopt and follow up the ideas and proposals put forward by SIPRI so that they outlive the end of the project, for the SIPRI project proper has now come to an end. Its true impact will be measured in terms of a number of suggestions which are actually put into practice in schools by those in a position to do so.

The BICHMO project

In 1987 the pedagogic commission of the CDIP (Swiss Conference of Cantonal Directors of Public Education) was commissioned to carry out a project entitled BICHMO (Bildung in der Schweiz von morgen) on education in Switzerland tomorrow. This study is currently in its initial phase and should lead to a number of recommendations and guidelines on educational policy for the attention of the CDIP, cantons and training institutions. It should give a clear picture of future development prospects in compulsory schooling, the various types of post-compulsory schooling, adult education and their role within the educational system as a whole. There would seem to be little future in the educational field for studies concentrating on one type of organisation, like schools, for example; on the one hand, schools are only one part of the education system and on the other hand, insufficient attention is given to relations with society at large. That is why the BICHMO project not only looks at schools but also intends to adopt a much broader approach, open to the outside world, with the help of experts from every field.

The LEFO project

The LEFO project (short for Lehrerfortbildung, or further training for teachers) which has just got underway in Switzerland should come up with some fresh ideas for improving and renewing further training courses for teachers on the basis of an inventory drawn up by cantons, regions and teachers' associations. Further training for teachers has been on the increase in all cantons over the last 20 years and the CDIP has contributed greatly to defining the pedagogical justification and orientation of this further training. It would seem that increasing demands on teachers and the importance of further training in keeping abreast of new teaching methods will continue to be the driving force behind further training. The problem today is to improve the quality and the range of services, by exchanging information, systematically following-up the more promising developments and clarifying fundamental questions, to help cantons and teachers' associations to adjust further training courses for teachers to suit changing demands.